

# Victims Rights Week Will Be Even Harder This Year

By Sam Glover

Director, South Carolina Department of Probation, Parole and Pardon Services

This week marks the state and national commemoration of Victims' Rights Week, a particularly poignant event in light of the horrific events at Virginia Tech on April 16.

Consider for a moment the scope of crime victimization: nearly 1.4 million Americans were victims of violent crime in 2005, according to the US Dept. of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, and more than 10 million property crimes were committed. More than 32,000 South Carolinians were victims of violent crime in 2005 and another 183,000 citizens were victims of non-violent crimes.

During the past three decades, the United States has taken dramatic steps in securing victims' rights and protection, and providing services to victims of crime. With the passage of victims' rights laws the criminal justice system has become more responsive to victims' needs and concerns. Currently, more than 10,000 victim assistance programs have been established throughout the country. Every state has a crime victim compensation fund. Powerful federal laws, such as the Violence Against Women Act and the Crime Victims' Rights Act, help protect victims and fund needed services.

In our state we have a Constitutional Amendment to protect crime victims. The State Office of Victim Assistance, under Gov. Mark Sanford, houses the victims' compensation fund for S.C. and provides other assistance to victims and victim service providers. Victim service providers may now be found in virtually every sheriff's office, solicitor's office, and most police departments.

At the South Carolina Department of Probation, Parole and Pardon Services, we provide assistance to crime victims every day. With twenty full-time victim advocates, victims are kept informed and involved in community supervision of offenders as well as parole and pardon hearings. In 2006, our Office of Victim Services sent out nearly 15,000 notifications to

victims of upcoming parole hearings and assisted more than 1,800 crime victims at the hearings.

One of the victims who is provided assistance through our Department is Carol Koch. In 1976, a disgruntled employee kidnapped her son in Myrtle Beach. He eventually shot and killed her son and husband. Every year, for the past ten years, Carol has had to come to the killer's parole hearing (under old sentencing laws - in 1995 the General Assembly abolished parole for persons convicted of murder).

"When my husband and son were killed I didn't have any rights. In order for me to make a difference I had to take an active stand," Ms. Koch said. Now, victim advocates and a parole and criminal justice system more responsive to victims, have made a tremendous difference. On July 18, she will travel from her home in another state for her eleventh parole hearing.

Most crimes are not known nationally or even statewide. These crime victims navigate the criminal justice system, usually with only their family and close friends to provide support. The role of our victim advocates is to assist victims in their journey through this system in the best way possible.

Some crimes do rise to the level that traumatize a community or even the entire nation, as was the case in Blacksburg, VA. As our nation mourns the loss of life at Virginia Tech, this massacre serves to reinforce our commitment in the law enforcement community to serve victims of crime with dignity and respect, never losing sight of the fact that every crime has a far-reaching impact.

The victim services profession has made great strides in delivering quality, timely services to victims of crime. Crime victims, once an afterthought in the criminal justice system, are at the forefront of our efforts when working with those who would victimize the innocent.